

Witness Name: Nazmin Akthar
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THE INDEPENDENT INQUIRY INTO CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE

Witness Statement of Nazmin Akthar

I, Nazmin Akthar, Non-Executive Director and Co-Chair of the board of Muslim Women's Network UK, will say as follows:-

1. Muslim Women's Network UK ("MWNUK") is a registered charity (reg. no. 1155092) whose registered office is The Warehouse, 54 – 57 Allison Street, Digbeth, B5 5TH. I have been acting as a Non-Executive Director of MWNUK since August 2011; I fulfilled the role of Vice-Chair from December 2012 to November 2018, the role of Chair from the period December 2018 to September 2019 and since September 2019 have been fulfilling the role of Co-Chair of the board of MWNUK.
2. As the contents of this Witness Statement is made on behalf of MWNUK, the terms "we" and "our" have been used to reflect the opinions of MWNUK on all matters. For the avoidance of doubt however notwithstanding the use of those words, the contents of this statement is to be interpreted as also expressing my own, personal opinion as well as that of MWNUK.
3. MWNUK's charitable objectives are as follows:
 - a. The promotion of equality and diversity for the public benefit, in particular by advancing education and raising awareness in equality and diversity, and promoting activities to foster understanding between people from diverse backgrounds;
 - b. To promote social inclusion for the public benefit by working with people who are socially excluded on the grounds of sex, ethnic origin, religion, belief or creed (in particular, women in the Muslim community) to relieve the needs of such people and assist them to achieve their potential and integrate into society, in particular by:
 - i. Providing forums that encourages and enables members of the Muslim community to participate more effectively with the wider community;
 - ii. Increasing, or coordinating, opportunities for members of the Muslim community to engage with service providers, to enable those providers to adapt services to better meet the needs of that community

c. The promotion of religious and racial harmony for the benefit of the public by promoting knowledge and mutual understanding and respect of the beliefs and practices of different religious and racial groups

4. In furtherance of its objectives, MWNUK carries out the following activities:

a. Running the only national faith and culturally sensitive helpline for Muslim women and girls (though not exclusively), known as the MWN Helpline. Our MWN Helpline is confidential, impartial and non-judgmental, through which we provide support and advice on a range of issues including sexual abuse, sexual exploitation, domestic abuse, forced marriage and mental health matters.

b. Providing a faith and culturally aware counselling service to service users;

c. Providing casework support to the more complex cases of the MWN Helpline

d. Conducting outreach activities to increase our reach and raise awareness of the help and support available to victims of all forms of abuse

e. Conducting research and publishing research reports; MWNUK were the first organisation to carry out research and produce a report shining a light on the hidden sexual exploitation of young Asian women and girls in the UK

f. Producing resources, such as videos and booklets

g. Providing training to groups of individuals and organisations on a range of matters; such as clarifying what is sexual exploitation, spotting the signs of abuse, safeguarding steps which can or should be taken to protect and support the victims, and key factors to consider when engaging and assisting with victims (so that victims can feel supported and empowered, rather than becoming frightened and disengaging)

h. Speaking at and/or holding events (including roundtable meetings)

i. Engaging with government bodies and officials (including Ministers) to share our insights and experiences and seek changes which will help end abuse, protect and support victims and bring perpetrators to justice

j. Campaigning activities

k. Engaging with media

5. The MWN Helpline, which was launched in January 2015, is our greatest source of knowledge and information on the issues faced by Muslim women and girls. However even prior to the commencement of the MWN Helpline, MWNUK has been fully aware of the type, range and extent of the issues involved through its range of activities and through connections (which includes a network of members) sharing their lived experiences with us. The MWN Helpline has certainly allowed us to consolidate and harness our expertise through much more focused data gathering, recording and data evaluation, but our expertise has been developed over the course of sixteen years and it is this collective experience that we rely upon within this Witness Statement. The reason we make this point is because whilst specific data (in this case in respect of child sexual abuse cases) is only available for the more recent years, in our opinion

this should not mean that the views, opinions and experiences of victims in the earlier years should be ignored as to do so would be contrary to the aims of the Inquiry.

6. We have been questioned about our experience of the current level of child protection policies and practices within religious organisations and settings that it works with. To clarify first of all, our work is predominantly with victims of sexual abuse rather than directly with such religious organisations. We have from time to time worked with mosques and religious leaders, such as Imams, but they have tended to be project and/or event specific activities. For example, in March 2015 MWNUK worked with the Maryam Centre (East London Mosque) to raise awareness of the prevalence of child sexual exploitation in Asian/Muslim communities in a bid to ensure that attendees are able to spot the signs and victims are not ignored. In June 2015 we also partnered with Light of Islam Academy to hold an event discussing the issue of forced marriage (including the link with sexual abuse) also in a bid to raise awareness and prevent crimes. The vast majority of our experiences are secondary in that they are based upon the information provided to us by our service users, members of our network and members of the public through our different activities. However given that victims have taken the brave step to share with us (a charity) their experiences of sexual abuse, we do not feel that MWNUK's sharing of such experiences should be given any lesser weight.
7. We have also been asked whether we can point to any examples of particularly good practice in relation to child protection within a specific religious setting or organisation that MWNUK works with. We feel unable to provide a response to this question for the following reasons:
 - a. As our work is predominantly with victims of sexual abuse, we tend to only hear about the negative experiences and practices. Whilst there may be religious organisations that have positive practices in relation to safeguarding children from sexual abuse, we are unable to comment on the same due to the nature of our work and on balance, it seems more appropriate to not provide a response than suggest there are no organisations following good practice guidelines at all.
 - b. There are some individual practices that we have observed that we do consider to be positive; one such example is those Islamic schools that clearly highlight the names and qualifications of their staff members onto their website. We think that transparency is a key aspect of child safeguarding and parents (and members of the public generally) should be able to see clearly who is involved. It also means that if anyone is aware of an individual who could pose a safeguarding risk, they can raise their concerns. However we do not feel it is appropriate to specifically mention such schools and Madrassahs and put them forward as following good practice because we do not know about any other practices within the organisation which could nevertheless be negative and/or raise serious safeguarding concerns.
 - c. Where child sexual abuse in religious organisations or setting is concerned, the general patterns tends to be one of silence amidst the disclosure. That is, victims may inform us that they have been abused now or in the past in a religious setting or that they suspect a child in their care has been (such as a parent calling up) but the specific facts (i.e. the individual or

institution involved) tends to remain hidden. We feel that this may be because, whilst victims recognise the need and have felt able to take the step to seek help to deal with the trauma of the sexual abuse they have endured, various cultural barriers continue to impede taking the matter to the next step. We have from time to time taken matters further where we have been provided with details; one such example is raising a complaint with a Shariah council of the child safeguarding risks they posed (please see further details below).

d. We have worked with mosques, Islamic schools and faith leaders from time to time and in different capacities. Whilst we have had no concerns during the course of our engagement with such organisations (and if we have we have formally raised complaints; please see as an example our letter of complaint to Birmingham Central Mosque regarding one of their trustees), we are conscious that individuals may take any such comments as endorsements of those organisations. We feel this is inappropriate particularly in the context of discussing child sexual abuse because whilst our engagement may have been positive, we have not carried out a review of the institution from a child safeguarding perspective and we cannot therefore be sure that there are no concerns in this respect. We therefore feel it is best to not provide an affirmative response (one way or the other) to the question because on the one hand we do not want to provide any premature endorsements but on the other hand it is unfair to not mention that there have been Islamic institutions that have worked with us on raising awareness of forced marriage and sexual abuse. Indeed, we feel that those religious organisations that have been willing to work with us should be commended for working with external, women's rights charities to help promote the safeguarding of children.

8. We have not conducted any systematic reviews or studies into the level of child protection provision specifically within religious settings or organisations in the UK (though we have looked at the issue of child sexual exploitation generally; please see our report Unheard Voices). This is not for want of desire but due to a lack of funds, resources and access to such organisations and settings. We would certainly be happy to lead and conduct such a review if the funds and resources were made available to us. Indeed, we feel that it is imperative that a review is carried out as soon as possible so that the extent of the problem of child sexual abuse within religious settings can be truly understood. We feel that even our knowledge is only the tip of the iceberg and the scale of the problem is hidden due to the silence of victims (such silence forced upon them due to a number of cultural barriers). This is a serious hindrance because it makes room for excuses, such as there not being a problem of child sexual abuse in their institution setting or even community and that therefore nothing else needs to be done.
9. Having clarified the above, based on the information available to us and the experiences that have shared with MWNUK, we feel that there is a serious lack of understanding and ability to spot the signs of child sexual abuse in the first place, let alone know the next steps to be taken to support and safeguard the victim. We feel that, at best, there is ignorance and naivety involved (such as, assumptions that

religious leaders – as people of faith – would not go against their faith and abuse children). Thus, whilst there may be policies and procedures in place on paper, implementation is limited due to a lack of understanding and in some cases, actively turning a blind eye.

10. When raising our concerns relating to child sexual abuse in religious settings, we do so in the context of the following:

a. Child sexual abuse within Mosques and Islamic faith schools, in a teaching context: This includes day schools, boarding schools and after school lessons (such as lessons attended by children in the evening or at weekends). We also mean sexual abuse not just by teachers and trainers but also those in a position of management (such as board of trustees), students given a position of authority (head boy, head girl etc) and external guests such as religious leaders invited to attend for a guest lecture

b. Child sexual abuse within the home environment but also in a teaching context: Some parents may choose to pay an individual (Imam or Hafiz or the like) to attend their home to teach their children about the Quran and the faith. This could be the child's own home or the home of a tutor, or even a third party altogether.

c. Child sexual abuse facilitated through religious organisations or leaders; in this instance we mean individuals and organisations making provisions so that a perpetrator of abuse can have access to the child. We would like to specifically draw your attention to one of our MWN Helpline case that was reported on by Rights Info on 27th March 2019 (please see extract at Exhibit 10). In this case a female service user had approached the MWN Helpline for help with trying to obtain an Islamic divorce; she had already approached a London based Shariah Council for a divorce. She had alleged that her husband had sexually abused their child (one of the reasons which made her want a divorce from him). This had been reported to the police and relevant child protection services were involved. Despite the Shariah Council being informed of the same, they informed the woman that she can only obtain a divorce from her husband if she allowed her husband to have access to the child. Thankfully she contacted us for support and we were able to intervene; we told her not to sign any such agreement given that this would place her child at risk of sexual abuse and were able to help her obtain her divorce from elsewhere. Whilst this was raised with the Shariah council, we were limited in what other action we could take given that Shariah Councils are unregulated and practically speaking, in our opinion they could have only faced liability in the event that the woman had signed the agreement and allowed the child to go to the father and the father had abused the child. We think it is extremely concerning that, despite knowing there is a potential risk of child sexual abuse involved, they were actually ready to risk the safety of the child. Thus whilst we talk about religious settings, we feel it is imperative that focus is extended beyond teaching environments and the likes of Shariah councils also included in the scope of the Inquiry.

d. Child sexual abuse in a non-teaching context (spiritual guidance and spiritual healing (ruqiyah)): Lack of mental health awareness is a key issue in the Muslim community; more often than not, mental health

matters (or other personal issues or grievances) are attributed to supernatural powers such as black magic or possession by spirits (jinns). Individuals will seek the assistance of so-called spiritual healers/leaders (the name given to such service providers can vary - some may be called Imams, some may be referred to as 'Pirs' etc) to relieve themselves from the distresses (mental health issues, financial loss etc) allegedly caused by black magic or spirit possession. Those providing such services can then exploit the opportunity to sexually abuse both women and children (please see some examples provided below). This religious setting is not restricted to any particular place or individual.

e. Child sexual abuse in other faith-based services, such as Hijama (cupping) sessions or spiritual 'counselling'. This setting is not restricted to any particular place or individual as it can be provided anywhere, including the victim's home.

11. Before we set out our main concerns, we wish to share a case study from our report, 'Unheard Voices' (2013, pg 107):

Imaan who was from a Muslim background was in her late teens when she being groomed by her Quran teacher, her father and the women in their respective families. She had sustained years of not only sexual and physical abuse but also psychological brainwashing. Imaan had always believed her teacher to be right because he used verses from the Quran, which he claimed justified his abuse of her by her father. Her father stopped sexually abusing her when she reached puberty. However her Quran teacher continued the abuse. His wife was aware of the abuse and even counselled Imaan to continue allowing it to happen when she began to object to it.

Imaan came across information online, which made her question what the religious teacher had been telling her. She realised that the abuse could not be justified using the Quran. However she struggled to "let go" of the belief she had been taught because throughout her childhood it was her norm that was even validated by her mother. It has taken a number of years to help Imaan understand what she had suffered. Imaan eventually disclosed that other men and girls were also involved in this cycle of abuse.

12. We also mentioned the following abusive practices of some so-called 'faith-healers' in our 'Mental health & Muslim communities' booklet (2017, page 24):

a. *Telling women who are unable to get pregnant, who want their husbands to come back after a relationship breakdown, who believe they are possessed by a 'jinn' etc., that they need to have sex with them in order for their issues to be resolved*

b. *Asking families to leave unmarried women including children alone with them in a room and not to disturb them and to ignore any noise as the so called 'jinn' will scream / shout during the process of exorcism. They use this cover to sexually abuse and rape women and children.*

13. We would also like to share the following MWN Helpline case study, previously reported in our 2016 MWN Helpline Evaluation (2017; pg 22 – 23); although this case

does not specifically relate to religious organisations or settings we think it nevertheless highlights a key factor affecting child protection which needs to be taken into account by the Inquiry:

Different adults had sexually abused Shabnam as a child. When she raised concerns about her abuse as an adult survivor, she was told that she had black magic done on her. Shabnam did try and also attempt to challenge one of her abusers about what had happened. He blamed her for the abuse. Shabanam felt depressed and was having flashbacks and panic attacks. When she called the Helpline, she did not want to report her abusers to the police she just wanted to be able to cope mentally.

14. Our main concerns are as follows:

a. Child sexual abuse takes place in a range of religious settings but not all such settings are in fact regulated; key examples include activities conducted by Shariah councils and Quranic lessons and spiritual healing or 'exorcisms' provided in the home by spiritual healers. It appears to us that it is almost too easy to set yourself up as a tutor or healer without any regulation; this may be partly because the activities do not fall within the remit of being a 'regulated activity' or because individuals are able to simply ignore any vetting requirements because of a lack of oversight (and no one is going to raise complaints about them). Additionally, it is very easy to manipulate the facts and argue that the services are being provided to adults rather than children i.e. saying they have been asked to provide spiritual guidance to parents when in fact the parents have hired them to 'treat' or 'tutor' their child. We also feel that a contributing factor is that 'counselling' is not generally regulated and people are able to state that they are providing a counselling service. This means that there are a large number of instances where abusers have complete free reign. Additionally where policies and procedures do exist, they are nevertheless insufficient to protect children.

b. Even outside of religious organisations and settings, abusers are nevertheless using religious texts (or misinterpretations of the same) to manipulate and coerce their victims; as the case study at para. 13 highlights, 'black magic' is used as a way to dismiss victim's allegations. We are also aware of cases where the actions of the abuser are also dismissed as having been due to 'black magic' or 'spirit possession'; i.e. the abuser wasn't really raping the victim, the spirit was and the victim is made to feel guilty for blaming the abuser when it allegedly wasn't their fault. The level of misuse of religious text and manipulation involved can have very serious consequences on the physical and mental health of victims.

c. There is in our opinion a lack of understanding or ignorance of the prevalence of child sexual abuse in religious settings; this may be due to naivety and assumptions that those portraying themselves as deeply religious would not then sexually abuse children. Signs can also be dismissed as children 'acting up' or due to black magic. We also feel that misogynistic attitudes play a factor in such dismissal; that is, blaming the victim for not behaving or dressing a certain way. There is therefore a clear need for specific safeguarding training on the issue. Such training must be tailored to that particular religious setting and make clear the signs and steps to be

taken in the event of actual or suspected sexual abuse. It should also involve myth-busting and challenging any misogynist viewpoints that individuals they may hold.

d. In some cases, those suspecting child sexual abuse may not know what to do about it; they may be scared themselves of speaking up and taking any steps. This may be due to simply not knowing who to contact, due to fears that they will be accused of lying (being accused of acting out of jealousy or some other ulterior motive e.g. vying for a particular position in the institution, paid by someone else to cause issues etc), fear of defamation claims being commenced by the abuser which they may not have the financial resources to counter (especially if the child in question is unwilling or unable to corroborate the facts) or indeed ostracisation by the community. This may be due to certain religious leaders being revered to almost a cult-like status; their blind followers will believe the leaders if told that it is some form of a 'conspiracy' or that they have been targeted due to an Islamophobic agenda

e. Leading on from the above, some individuals may feel it is better not to draw attention to the matter due to fears of fuelling Islamophobia; in some cases they may deal with the matter quietly and in others simply turn a blind eye. As an example, a victim recounts how as a child, a religious tutor touched her inappropriately and she was worried that he may do worse. She informed her mother who then told the tutor his services are no longer required and he should no longer come to their home. Whilst the mother took a step to protect her daughter, she did not mention the incident to anyone else (not even the father) and the daughter was told to not talk about this with anyone either. This means that this particular tutor was free to target others. For the avoidance of doubt, as an organisation we are fully aware of the effect of racism and Islamophobia on individuals (particularly Muslim women and girls) but nothing should come in the way of protecting children from harm.

f. Silence is a key factor acting as an impediment to effective child protection practices. This silence may be due to concepts of shame and dishonour (including fears of isolation, forced marriage and honour based abuse in the event that the sexual abuse becomes known) or because the victims (and their families) had been manipulated into believing that the sexual abuse is acceptable. The case study mentioned at para. 11 above is a clear example of how misinterpretations of faith can be used to falsely justify abuse and manipulate victims. The case study mentioned at para. 13 also highlights how the trauma of their ordeal can have life-long consequences meaning that the silence continues all the way into adulthood. Indeed we are aware of instances where victims of child sexual abuse only begin to acknowledge what has happened to them in their 50s- 60s. There are therefore a number of cultural barriers at play, which we have discussed in detail within our report 'Unheard Voices' in the context of sexual exploitation generally; the points raised in our 'Unheard Voices' report equally apply in this context and in fact is exacerbated due to the reverence of certain religious leaders.

g. More often than not the calls we receive are from adults who were sexually abused as children within religious settings; or we may receive

calls from adults (such as parents, school teachers) about actual or suspected child abuse cases. Even then adult victims continue to be reluctant to take action (or even name) their abusers. What worries us is that children appear to continue to not feel able to seek support at the time the abuse is happening. Not speaking up and/or not seeking help is therefore a serious issue not just because perpetrators are not brought to justice but because it can have extreme consequences for the victims; it can cause serious mental health issues and affect their personal relationships, as well as their educational and employment prospects. The main priority should be to protect and empower victims and help them deal with any trauma and indeed we would like all religious institutions (at the very least) to signpost external helplines and services that children can contact should they wish to talk about any issue affecting them (including child sexual abuse). Our MWN Helpline team is of course fully trained to deal with any such cases and we would like to see all mosques and Islamic schools at the very least mentioning the MWN Helpline as a service that both staff and students can contact for advice and support. We would then be able to take the lead in terms of taking the necessary safeguarding steps (including contacting the police, if necessary) to protect any actual or protected victims.

h. We are also concerned that in the case of Mosques and other Islamic institutions, although there may be some qualification requirements in terms of those providing teaching services, there is a much more relaxed attitude to those in senior management positions (such as board trustees). A number of our MWN Helpline cases have highlighted to us how, although the child sexual abuse itself was in the context of the family home, the abusers were nevertheless connected to religious institutions. One victim informs us that the uncle who abused her also acts as the Secretary of a prominent Mosque in Birmingham. Another victim who was also abused by her uncle states that her uncle is an employee of a Mosque, providing IT systems support. Yet another states that she was abused by a relative who is a trustee of the local mosque and community centre. Whilst these victims were talking about their relatives, these abusers are nevertheless involved in a setting where they may have access to other children and would have the opportunity to abuse them – or may turn a blind eye to any abuse meted out by others.

15. As our 2015 Helpline Evaluation highlights, in 2015 we received 814 contacts from 335 beneficiaries of which five cases involved child sexual abuse. In 2016 (as shown by our 2016 Helpline Evaluation) a total of 1807 contacts were made by 583 beneficiaries; of these 10 involved child sexual abuse and 3 child sexual exploitation cases. In 2017 (as shown by our 2017 Helpline Evaluation) we received 2280 contacts from 792 beneficiaries, of which 23 cases involved child sexual abuse and 2 cases involved child sexual exploitation. In 2018 we had 3626 contacts by 931 beneficiaries; our 2018 Helpline Evaluation shows that 17 cases involved child sexual abuse and 3 cases involved child sexual exploitation. Whilst these numbers may seem small, we must point out that we have had very limited marketing of our MWN Helpline over the years due to a lack of funds and resources (though this year we have been able to carry out some marketing activities); we therefore feel that a lack of awareness of the existence

of our MWN Helpline is partially the reason why there have not been more calls on the issue. Secondly we feel child sexual exploitation is generally such a taboo subject that it is always difficult for victims to feel able to speak up, and this is more so when the abuser was a family member or known religious leader. Finally, whilst this is admittedly conjecture and we do not have evidence to corroborate this theory, we feel there may be an element of reluctance (by other organisations) to share details of our MWN Helpline given our Islamic feminist approach to matters of religious interpretation and our pro-LGBT+ stance. Although we receive calls from professionals or third sector organisations such as social services, police, education/health services and women's organisations, mosques and madrassahs have not (as far as we are able to analyse) featured in those calling us for advice. There are however some religious organisations that have been happy to share details of our MWN Helpline, including a mosque based in Southampton (we make the point about the location because MWNUK being based in Birmingham is not and should not act as an impediment for sign-posting as we do operate nationally).

16. Further details about those seeking the support or advice from our MWN Helpline can be found in our Helpline Evaluations for each year; this includes information relating to the gender, age and locations of callers as well as the reasons for calls.
17. We therefore feel that one of the main challenges faced by those within religious organisations is to change the culture of ignorance and naivety and establish a safe environment where victims feel able to speak up and seek help. For this to occur there needs to be an acceptance of the fact that child sexual abuse is an unfortunate reality within all settings (including religious settings), that we all have a duty to stop all forms of sexual abuse and that external help may be necessary in achieving said safe environment. This may mean seeking the support of organisations such as MWNUK, instead of trying to deal with such matters internally.
18. Based on the cases we have dealt with and/or the sexual abuse cases that have been brought to our attention, we believe that there is clearly much room for improvement in terms of regulation – and that existing arrangements are generally inadequate. We therefore strongly agree that there should be registration and/or inspection requirements relating to all religious settings that may directly or indirectly be involved with children under the age of 18. By indirectly, we mean seeking regulation of Shariah councils that are getting involved in child protection matters. The most urgent need for reform, regulation and inspection however is for those religious settings outside that of institutions which are completely unchecked; such as Quran tutors attending the home and spiritual healers. Indeed a key flaw with the current system of vetting and barring is that private tuition classes (and tutors) working outside of a company or institution are no longer covered, nor are those that provide pastoral care. We also feel there is merit to requiring inspections or audits by an external body. If the inspection is solely child protection related, we do not feel there is a need for the inspecting body to be religious in nature (as principles surrounding child safeguarding should in our opinion be universal and applied across the board in the same manner).
19. In addition to regulation, there needs to be a community wide change in attitude in respect of such settings as it is parents that ultimately need to check that the person

they have hired to teach their child or provide spiritual guidance is someone that does not pose a safeguarding risk. Linked to this is a clear and urgent need to raise awareness of mental health issues so that instead of seeking the services of so-called spiritual healers, parents seek the appropriate medical and professional support for their children. In partnership with Wandsworth CCG we are currently presenting a number of workshops to BAME women in Wandsworth, London, to challenge the myths, stereotypes and stigmas and prevent such abusive situations occurring. We strongly feel that such sessions should be rolled out more widely. We would also suggest that spirituality-based counselling (relating to all faiths) should be a service that can be provided through recognised bodies and professionals (i.e. GPs should be able to refer patients for such spiritual mental health support). If individuals are able to obtain spiritual counselling through such avenues then there will be less of a need to seek 'advice' or 'counselling' from religious leaders and/or spiritual healers. MWNUK does provide faith and culturally aware counselling and we provide a copy of the Evaluation Report of our counselling service for further information as to what is involved and the impact.

20. We most certainly agree that religious organisations (and as applicable, leaders) should be subject to minimum standards. In particular we feel that in addition to ensuring they have a suitable safeguarding policy in place, there should be a requirement to provide regular training and checks to establish understanding, conduct internal reviews of the policy's application and a formal review should be carried out at least once a year to confirm its continued suitability. As an organisation that works with children in schools and provides age-appropriate training so that children have a better understanding of what constitutes abuse, their rights and choices and who to contact if they need help, support or advice, we strongly believe there is merit to making such sessions compulsory within all schools. This not only empowers potential victims but also helps develop critical thinking skills so that they are able to understand and challenge inappropriate views and actions. They are also empowered to take steps in the event that a peer is at risk of abuse. We feel such workshops should be conducted by external bodies, such as specialist charities like MWNUK, so that children feel able to approach and ask as many questions as they feel without worrying about the reaction of their teachers and/or schools. In November 2018 we provided Written Evidence to the Department of Education's Consultation on Relationships Education, RSE and Health Education where we discussed the importance of such subjects in more detail, in the context of safeguarding and empowering youth. We would be grateful if you would take into account our comments in our Written Evidence (Exhibit 8).
21. We also feel that it is imperative that those working within religious settings (including trustees of Mosques and Madrassahs) should be required to undergo equality and diversity training that is specifically tailored to their faith. For example, those involved with teaching or providing other services to children should be questioned on their views on forced marriage, domestic abuse, women's role in Islam, right to choose (and what in their opinion is the Islamic approach to such matters) etc. We feel that for example, anyone condoning or trying to minimise the issue of forced marriage is a risk to children as they may not raise the alarm if a child is suspected to be at risk of forced marriage or may even manipulate the child into one. We also feel mental health first aid

training should be compulsory. We agree that faith leaders should be required to undertake a common qualification within the context of child protection issues, which could incorporate all these aspects.

22. We believe it would be useful to have a model set of policies on managing child protection issues and dealing with any allegations. A common set of training materials and question and answer sheets is also likely to be useful. However such documentation should not be generic and should be based upon issues and examples that have or are likely to occur within the religious organisation or setting. We would be happy to assist in preparing and/or providing guidance on the creation of such documentation. We think it is also necessary to ensure there is regular checking of an individual's understanding of policies and procedures involved so as to ensure there is no room for complacency. Existing guidance will be continue to be useful as a point of reference but we do feel that specific guidance should be issued that has been tailored to specifically deal with religious settings; this will also remove any ability to argue that an individual felt the guidance did not apply to their particular circumstances. In 2016 we did respond to the Department of Education's consultation on Out of School Settings; a copy of our response has been provided. Despite a few concerns, which we have highlighted in our response, in general we are in agreement with the proposed measures. We believe that any Code of Conduct however should be compulsory as we fear that a voluntary Code of Conduct will only mean that religious organisations and those working in other religious settings simply choose to opt out. We also feel that this will give the impression that child protection issues are not to be taken seriously.

23. We would be happy to assist in terms of providing training and guidance to religious institutions and those working individually in other forms of religious settings. We have regularly provided training in schools to students and teachers, as well as to professionals including organisations in the women's sector. Indeed we have also provided training to taxi drivers in a bid to help them spot the signs of child sexual abuse in respect of any child passengers they may come across and what practical steps they can take to protect the victim, including ways to alert the police without placing the child in further danger. Given our expertise on the issues around child sexual abuse in Muslim communities, we feel we would be best able to provide training to those dealing with children in religious settings such as Mosques, Madrassahs and those providing tutoring in the home environment (and any other context). As a charity, our training workshops are generally funded by grants or in partnership with others. In the event that we were asked to provide training to religious organisations and grant funding was not available, we would generally only look to cover our costs involved such as staff time relating to preparation and delivery, venue hire, travel expenses and any other administrative costs and disbursements. Whilst we would need to provide a sum depending on the circumstances of each training, we would estimate that training costs should generally be in the region of £500 for between 12 to 15 delegates (not including travel and venue hire). MWNUK are not required to charge VAT. However we do not want costs to be a reason (or excuse) for religious organisations to not undergo training. We hope therefore that money can be allocated for training purposes for those individuals and organisations that are legitimately able to argue that they cannot afford safeguarding training. We would also be happy to speak to such individuals and organisations and discuss ways to facilitate the training and how our costs can be

reduced. The MWN Helpline can also be called for free for support or advice by any individual.

24. In terms of making it compulsory for religious leaders to make a report, we wish to make the point that reports and referrals should already be made where an actual or suspected victim is under the age of 18. As this should be happening already (following an appropriate safeguarding policy and ensuring the safety of the victim), we do not see a concern in making this compulsory. Our concern however is whether such individuals would know how truly deal with the matter in an appropriate manner, without somehow further jeopardising the victim's safety. In January 2019 we responded to the Home Office's consultation on preventing forced marriage which also looked at mandatory reporting; we have made a number of comments within our report which we feel equally apply in this context and should be taken into account.

Statement of Truth

I believe that the facts stated in this witness statement are true.

Signed: _____

Dated: _____

Witness Name:
Statement No.: 1
Exhibits:
Dated:

THE INDEPENDENT INQUIRY INTO CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE

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EXHIBIT [] / 1

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